



Swainson's Hawks . . . "the OTHER Buteo"

Trish Nixon, Raptor Specialist
The Peregrine Fund's World Center for Birds of Prey

When seen casually on a road trip, Swainson's hawks are often mis-identified as Red-tailed hawks or other uteos by those who spot them perched along country by-ways. The Swainson's hawk, however, has many unique characteristics as well as some fascinating hunting habits.

The North American range of the Swainson's hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*) extends from parts of Alaska, through Canada and from the American mid-west to California. Named after the British naturalist, William Swainson, the hawk is also referred to as "Black hawk", "Grasshopper hawk" or "Brown hawk". Let's explore the characteristics that help set it apart from other raptors.

Swainson's tip the scales at 1.5 to nearly 3 pounds, - females being the larger gender (sexual dimorphism, common among raptors). With longer, more tapered wings than other Buteos, a Swainson's wingspan measures 4 to 4.5 feet. The underside trailing edges

of their wings are usually darker than the rest of the wing; a wide dark edge on some birds, a narrow edge on others. They fly with a slight dihedral, or "V" shape to their wings. Their broad, long tails are grayish with narrow dark bands and a buff-colored band at the tail's edge.

Another field mark aiding in identification is a "bib" of darker feathers on the upper chest of some Swainson's. Both dark and light morphs exist; dark morphs are very similar in appearance to those of the Red-tailed hawk, Ferruginous hawk, and Rough-legged hawk, but pale undertail coverts set the Swainson's apart from the rest. Juvenile Swainson's of both color varieties are similar in appearance, though the juvenile dark morphs' chest is more heavily streaked than that of the light morph. Vocalizations of these hawks are more varied and "whistle-like" than those of the Red-tailed hawk, with a series of descending "kree-kree", rather than the scream associated with the Red-tailed hawk.

Trees in riparian zones are often the site of Swainson's nests, but they also nest in solitary trees in open grasslands and agricultural zones. Constructed of large sticks and twigs, their nests are frequently lined with bark, lichens, and their own downy feathers - and occasionally adorned with flowers and leaves from other trees.

A typical clutch consists of 2 - 4 eggs, which both parents incubate. In 28 days or so, nestlings hatch and begin the process of eating and growing. At about 6 weeks of age, the young Swainson's are ready to make their first attempts at flight, and have reached the size of their parents. At two years of age, they are ready to find a mate and have chicks of their own. Growing up happens fast in the raptor world!

Relatively small feet and lightning-fast reflexes are adaptations perfectly suited for hunting insects, rodents, and other small prey. Although a Swainson's



Photo courtesy Bruce Ackerman

grocery list includes small mammals, birds and some reptiles during breeding/ nesting season, they rely almost entirely on insects for sustenance through-out the rest of the year. They are experts at hunting locusts, grasshoppers, and crickets. Fence posts and telephone poles are vantage points for their hunting excursions - from a perch, they spot their prey and swoop down upon it. In addition to the "perch & swoop" technique, they also hunt on foot. Freshly cut hay and wheat fields make top-notch hunting grounds, and you may see several

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Shannon Ehlers and
Jethro Runco, IDFG

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fly behind or beside mowers and tillers, "harvesting" insects disturbed by machinery. Again, this hawk uses a "disturbance" to its advantage. Grass fires cause insects and small prey to flee in mass hysteria; and the hawks feast on scurrying prey by hunting just ahead of the fire.

A Swainson's hawk hunting in Idaho's summer hay fields may spend his winter in such far-away places as Paraguay, Uruguay, Brazil, Mexico, or Argentina! Summer ends with the inevitable decline in insect availability, prompting the hawks to take to the wing and migrate along the Transamerican Flyway to central and South America. Migrating in groups of thousands, many fly over Veracruz, Mexico and surrounding territory. In one season, approximately 850,000 Swainson's hawks were counted over Veracruz during an impressive journey of 15,000 miles, round trip!

They are a gregarious raptor, and upon reaching their destination, are often seen foraging by the hundreds in large fields. The use of DDT and other organophosphate insecticides, not outlawed in all countries, poses a great threat to hawks as they consume grasshoppers at the end of their

migratory journey. In 1995 and 1996, the Swainson's hawk population took a big hit when 6,000 died from the ingestion of, or direct exposure to, organophosphate insecticides sprayed over sunflower and hay fields in Argentina. There are still die-offs of Swainson's and other raptors in areas where such pesticides continue to be used. In addition, changing agricultural practices are contributing to declining numbers of this hawk in some locations. As small farms are bought by larger commercial agri-business', trees and shrubs between fields- used for nesting and foraging - disappear. In addition, the urbanization of some former Swainson's hawk strongholds drives the birds away from historic breeding/nesting sites. As these practices continue in both in their breeding and wintering grounds, the Swainson's hawk will no doubt suffer.

As you travel, keep your eyes open for Swainson's hawks. Support programs that conserve the types of environments these and other raptors require for breeding, nesting and survival. Make your property "raptor-friendly", when possible. As valuable allies in the control of pests, and as marvelous creatures for all of us to admire, the Swainson's hawk will hopefully continue to soar and hunt over much of North America.

A Holiday Gift Idea for a Wildlife Enthusiast

This holiday season, surprise the wildlife enthusiast in your life by giving a Four Sockeye fish print created right here in Idaho. Four Sockeye is an partnership started by Rick Alsager, Doug Young and Dan Baker at the Sawtooth Fish Hatchery to commemorate the four sockeye salmon returning to Redfish Lake. Historically, millions of these fish returned to Redfish Lake, giving it its name.

The prints are loosely created using Gyotaku, a Japanese form of recording fish sizes. In historical Japan, fish were painted and pressed onto rice paper to record the catch. Today, Four Sockeye uses this technique on watercolor paper and linen and then adds additional features to create these beautiful representations of Idaho's native fish!

Five percent of all profits from Four Sockeye is donated to the Idaho Fish and Game nongame wildlife fund. We appreciate their support and encourage you to visit their website to view the colorful prints they create. <http://www.foursockeye.com/index.htm>



Since the first print, Four Sockeye has produced four new limited edition prints. In addition to "Redfish Return" (shown above), the prints include "Salmon River Rogue" (Chinook Salmon, 1998), "Spring Fling" (Steelhead, 2000), "Fish On" (White Sturgeon, 2002), and "A Cutt Above The Rest" (Westslope Cutthroat Trout 2005). One more print is expected between 2007 and 2008 titled Running from the Bulls (Bull Trout).

On the Prowl with Night Owls

by Shannon Ehlers and Jethro Runco
Wildlife Technicians, IDFG Salmon Region

At night, the line between imagined and real becomes blurred and mistaken identity becomes common. The growl of a stomach becomes the growl of a large predator, a sharp intake of breath sounds eerily like the hiss of a cat. However, in our quest to survey owls on the Salmon-Challis National Forest this past summer, it was running water that proved to be the most deceptive. Often, we would hear what sounded like dogs barking, or people talking, or even the low hoots of owls. When our target animal was a small owl with a deep voice, running water became our biggest aggravation.

Our project—a survey for flammulated owls on the South Zone of the Salmon-Challis National Forest—began in mid-May, when the creeks and gullies were swollen with snow-melt. It is in mid-May that these highly migratory owls arrive on breeding territories and are most responsive to playbacks of their calls. Flammulated owls are the second smallest owl in North America and the only small North American owl with dark eyes. Their name refers to the reddish wash of their plumage. They are primarily nocturnal owls that hunt insects and are extremely difficult to see due to their secretive habits and small size. Flammulated owls prefer open stands of mature ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir, and mixed stands of these two species. Prior to our survey, no count-based monitoring for this species had occurred in the South Zone and historic and contemporary indicated flammulated owls were not present. There was a good chance we might not even hear a flammulated owl, much less see this diminutive bird.

Our first survey was an exciting night with both of us detecting what sounded like an owl at almost every calling station. The problem was that the other person would not hear the bird. We quickly realized that it was not owl hoots we were hearing but the low frequency murmur of running water. We also heard in that running water the toots of Northern saw-whet owl, another small forest owl, and the “whooh-ahh” portion of a Barred owl call (a rare bird in central Idaho).

That first night taught us how deceiving running water can be; that we needed to focus on hoot patterns versus the random hoot-like noises produced by running water. Flammulated owls produce single and double hoots with each hoot occurring about 3 seconds apart. Our first night ended with many “phantom owls”—but no “flams.”

On our second night of surveys on a ridge far from any water, we heard our first deep hoot of a flammulated owl. It was responding to our caller, mimicking the rhythm of double and single hoots the caller produced. At another calling station, we heard another flammulated owl from about 900 feet away. It flew down ridge to within 50 feet of us. We tried in vain to catch the bird in the beam of our flashlight but it was hidden deep within the foliage of a Douglas-fir tree. On our third, fourth, and fifth nights surveying, we heard nothing but our breathing and our growling stomachs. This is how the survey season progressed; some nights hearing several owls and other nights hearing nothing.

From mid-May to mid-July, we completed 22 owl survey transects from Challis, Idaho to the Cape Horn area west of Stanley. We detected 38 flammulated owls with the majority of detections occurring in two drainages of the Stanley Basin. Though preliminary, the owl data revealed population “clusters” across the landscape with large areas of unoccupied habitat in between. This supports findings by several

researchers that Flammulated owls may be a “semi-colonial” species on its breeding range. In the course of our survey work, we also observed and heard northern Saw-whet owls, a Great gray owl, two Boreal owls, a Long-eared owl, and numerous Great-horned

owls. We were pretty thrilled to be able to document Flammulated owls where there were no previous records. And we were finally rewarded with a fleet sighting of our small feathered subject.



Photo courtesy IDFG

Shannon and Jethro played flammulated owl hoots on a portable speaker at each survey point, then listened for a response to determine if an owl was present. Surveys usually started at 10:00 pm and lasted until 1:00 am.

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Bald Eagle Removed from Endangered Species List

Kris Buchler, Coeur d'Alene Audubon member

On August 8, 2007 the Bald eagle was taken off the Federal List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants, forty years after it was listed.

The Bald eagle was first protected in 1918 under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Additional protection was given by the, later named Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act in 1940. Even with these laws in place, the Bald eagle population plunged in later decades due to widespread use of the pesticide DDT after WWII. DDT accumulated in the eagles, causing them to lay eggs with thin shells resulting in minimal breeding success. In 1967, the Bald eagle was listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Preservation Act of 1966 and later the Endangered Species Act of 1973. DDT was banned in the U.S. in 1972 and efforts to recover the bald eagle began in earnest.

Along with the ban of DDT, recovery progressed due to captive breeding programs, reintroductions, law enforcement efforts, education, protection of habitat, and land purchase and preservation activities. In 1963, the population was at its lowest at 417 breeding pairs in the lower 48 states. Today, after delisting, there are close to 10,000 breeding pairs in the lower 48 states.

Bald eagles still enjoy protection under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act. This federal law prohibits "taking" of eagles - defined as killing, selling, disturbing, or otherwise harming eagles, their nests, or eggs.

Fall *Wildlife Events*

Foothills Learning Center- Boise

The second Saturday of each month we offer a free family activity at the Foothills Learning Center from 10 am until 2 pm. Second Saturday is a great way to kick off your family weekend, explore nature, learn some new skills, get involved in foothills projects. This fall's offerings include:

October 13: Waste Not, Want Not: Backyard and Worm Composting

Turn your banana peels, coffee grounds, and yard waste into brown gold – compost! See the bugs! Hold the worms! It's fun for everyone.

November 10: The Art of Journaling and Illustration

Lewis and Clark have nothing on us! We will show you creative ways to document your experiences in the Boise Foothills. NO EXPERIENCE REQUIRED.

December 8: I'm Dreaming of a Green Christmas

Learn some great ways to decorate your home and choose and wrap gifts while treading gently on the Earth. Take home lots of great ideas – along with your own handmade wrapping paper!

To reach the Foothills Learning Center, take 8th Street north through Boise's North End. When you reach the end of the pavement, go 1/3 mile more and the Learning Center is on the right. Admission is free. Call 514-3755 or see www.cityofboise.org/parks/foothills.

Birds of Prey Northwest

December 2: Bald Eagle program and cruise on Lake Coeur d'Alene
12:45 pm-3 pm

Liberty, a live Bald eagle, will make an appearance with her handler, Jane Cantwell. See Liberty up close and listen to Jane's interesting program about Bald eagles. View bald eagle nests while enjoying a scenic cruise. Visit the Birds of Prey Northwest website for details and ticket information <http://www.birdsofpreynorthwest.org/> Or, call Kris Buchler at (208) 664-4739.



MK Nature Center-Boise

**October 26th & 27th, 6:30-8:30pm: Creatures of the Night
Nocturnal Celebration**

As the sun sets, out come the creatures of the night! Bring the whole family in costume to the MK Nature Center for our second annual Creatures of the Night Halloween event. Bring a sense of adventure for a night walk to learn all about nocturnal critters like beavers, owls, spiders, wolves, and crayfish. Purchase tickets in advance at the MK Nature Center. Tickets are \$3/person (kids 2 and under are free).

Saturday, December 1st, 10am-2pm: Holiday Bird Seed Sale

Stock up on winter bird seed and find that special gift for the outdoor person on your list. Purchase beautifully packaged premium bird seed from gift size samples to 40 pound bags. Other items for sale include quality bird feeders, books, and children's gifts. For additional information contact the MK Nature Center at 334-2225

Craters of the Moon-Arco

October 13: Earth Science Week Hike 9 am-4pm

(4 miles) Join the park geologist for a presentation at the Visitor Center followed by observation of volcanic features in the field. Reservations are available by calling 208-527-3257. Meet at the Visitor Center.